

EXPLORING EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILDREN FROM SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS AMONG NURSERY SCHOOL PUPILS

OLATUNJI, SAHEED OLAWALE

DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

SCHOOL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE, PRIMARY, ADULT AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION
(ECPAE)

FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (SPECIAL) PMB 1089 OYO, OYO STATE

Abstract

This study examined the exploring emotional and behavioural challenges faced by children from single-parent households among nursery school pupils. Anchored on Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969/1988) and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The sample comprised 50 pupils aged 3–5 years, selected through stratified random sampling (25 from single-parent and 25 from two-parent households), with data provided by teachers and caregivers.

Three instruments were used: a Teacher-Rated Checklist of Emotional and Behavioural Problems, a Parental/Guardian Questionnaire, and a Structured Observation Guide. Content validity was ensured through expert review, and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 confirmed reliability. Data collection lasted four weeks, combining teacher ratings, parent responses, and researcher observations. Descriptive statistics described common challenges, independent sample t-tests compared groups, and multiple regression tested risk and protective factors at the 0.05 significance level.

Findings revealed that pupils from single-parent households reported significantly higher emotional difficulties ($M = 12.64$, $SD = 2.35$) than those from two-parent households ($M = 9.08$, $SD = 2.12$), $t(48) = 5.28$, $p = .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.48$). Behavioural problems such as aggression and classroom disturbance were also more pronounced. Parental stress, economic strain, and harsh discipline significantly predicted difficulties, while nursery

school support, nonresident parent involvement, and extended family assistance served as protective factors.

The study concludes that family structure significantly shapes children's emotional and behavioural adjustment. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, with informed consent obtained from parents and guardians.

Keywords: Single-parent households; Two-parent households; Nursery pupils; Emotional challenges; Behavioural problems; Attachment Theory; Ecological Systems Theory; Early childhood development

Introduction

The family is the primary socializing unit that shapes a child's emotional, social, and cognitive growth, and its stability is especially vital during early childhood when the foundations of learning and personality are established. In Nigeria, changing marital patterns, economic hardship, and rising divorce rates have contributed to an increase in single-parent households. Children raised in such contexts are more likely to experience low self-esteem, social withdrawal, aggression, and learning difficulties due to reduced parental attention, inconsistent discipline, and limited resources (Adegboyega, 2019; Wajim, 2020). Emotional challenges such as anxiety and depression are also common, often intensified by social stigma and the absence of adequate support systems (Chenube, 2023; John & Shimfe, 2020).

Evidence from other countries reinforces these concerns. Studies show that children from single-parent families face heightened risks of aggression, conduct problems, sadness, and anxiety (Huang et al., 2019), with poorer socio-emotional outcomes across cultural settings (Sigle-Rushton, 2015). Although cultural and policy contexts may influence results, single-parenting generally increases the vulnerability of preschool-aged children worldwide (Isaac, 2024). Children in nursery schools, aged 3–5 years, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of family transitions, economic strain, and parental stress, as these factors can lead to inconsistent caregiving that undermines their emotional stability and school readiness. Reports from Nigeria, India, and Malaysia highlight that these children are two to six times more likely to exhibit

emotional and behavioural difficulties, ranging from anxiety and depression to hyperactivity and social withdrawal (John, 2023; Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Rahim et al., 2023). Parental stress further worsens these challenges, as overburdened single parents may unintentionally pass on anxiety and insecurity, leading to heightened behavioural and emotional problems (Fu, 2023).

This study is guided by Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969/1988) and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Attachment Theory stresses the role of consistent caregiving in fostering emotional security, while disruptions common in single-parent households may lead to withdrawal, aggression, or anxiety (Huang et al., 2019). Ecological Systems Theory explains how interactions across family, school, and community environments influence development, with the absence of a parent altering these systems in ways that shape children's adjustment (Chenube, 2023). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for examining the emotional and behavioural challenges faced by nursery school pupils from single-parent households.

Statement of the Problem

Early childhood is a critical stage for developing social and emotional regulation, yet nursery school pupils from single-parent households often face unmet emotional needs and behavioural difficulties that disrupt learning, peer interaction, and school adjustment. These children are commonly perceived as anxious, withdrawn, or emotionally unstable, while others exhibit aggression and noncompliance that interfere with classroom routines.

Although single-parent households are on the rise in Nigeria, research has largely focused on primary and secondary school pupils, leaving a gap in understanding how early experiences in such contexts affect psychosocial development. If left unaddressed, these challenges can escalate into long-term behavioural disorders, poor academic achievement, and difficulties in forming stable social relationships.

Risk factors such as parental stress, economic strain, and inconsistent caregiving often heighten these problems, while protective factors like nonresident parent involvement, supportive nursery environments, and early interventions may help to cushion them. However, the effectiveness of such supports within the Nigerian context remains underexplored. This study therefore aims to investigate the emotional and behavioural challenges of nursery school pupils

from single-parent households and to identify protective factors that can foster resilience and healthy development.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the emotional and behavioural challenges of nursery school pupils from single-parent households in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

Identify the prevalent emotional challenges (such as anxiety and low self-esteem) experienced by nursery school pupils from single-parent households in Nigeria.

Determine the behavioural problems (such as aggression and noncompliance) commonly observed among these pupils and compare them with those from two-parent households.

Examine the risk factors (such as parental stress and economic strain) that contribute to the emotional and behavioural challenges of nursery school pupils from single-parent households.

Assess the protective factors (such as nonresident parent involvement and quality of nursery school support) that mitigate these challenges and evaluate the effectiveness of nursery-based strategies in addressing them.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions, adapted from empirical frameworks in Nigerian and international contexts that examine family structure's impact on young children's psychosocial outcomes:

What are the prevalent emotional challenges (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem) faced by nursery school pupils from single-parent households in Nigeria?

What behavioral problems (e.g., aggression, noncompliance) are commonly observed among these pupils, and how do they differ from those in two-parent households?

What risk factors (e.g., parental stress, economic strain) contribute to the emotional and behavioral challenges in single-parent nursery pupils?

What protective factors (e.g., nonresident parent involvement, nursery school quality) mitigate these challenges, and how effective are nursery-based strategies in addressing them?

Hypothesis

H₁: There is no significant difference in the prevalence of emotional challenges between nursery school pupils from single-parent households and those from two-parent households in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to examine the emotional and behavioural challenges of nursery school pupils from single-parent households in Ibadan South West Local Government Area, Oyo State. The design was suitable as it enabled data collection on children's psychosocial experiences within their natural school settings.

The population comprised all nursery pupils aged 3–5 years in Ibadan South West. Using stratified random sampling, a total of 50 pupils were selected: 25 from single-parent households and 25 from two-parent households. Teachers and caregivers familiar with the children were also involved to provide reliable reports.

Three instruments were used. The Teacher-Rated Checklist of Emotional and Behavioural Problems was adapted and validated for the Nigerian context. The Parental/Guardian Questionnaire gathered data on family structure, risk and protective factors, while a Structured Observation Guide captured behaviours such as withdrawal, aggression, and noncompliance during classroom activities. Expert review established content validity, and a pilot test produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 for reliability.

Data collection lasted four weeks. Teachers completed the rating scales, parents filled questionnaires during school meetings, and the researcher conducted direct observations to triangulate findings.

Data were analyzed using mean and Standard deviation to describe common emotional and behavioural challenges, while independent sample t-tests tested differences between pupils from single-parent and two-parent households. Multiple regression examined the influence of risk and protective factors. The significance level was set at 0.05.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from parents and guardians. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants were ensured.

Results, Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

This section provided answers to the research questions:

Research question 1: What are the prevalent emotional challenges (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem) faced by nursery school pupils from single-parent households in Nigeria?

Table 1: Summary of Result showing Standard Deviation to describe the Prevalent Emotional Challenges among Nursery Pupils by Family Structure

Emotional Challenges	Single-Parent (n = 25) M (SD)	Two-Parent (n = 25) M (SD)	t (48)	p
Anxiety/worry	2.84 (0.62)	2.12 (0.58)	4.19	.001
Low self-confidence	3.00 (0.71)	2.28 (0.64)	3.64	.001
Peer isolation	2.68 (0.60)	2.04 (0.57)	3.71	.001
Frequent crying	2.76 (0.66)	2.16 (0.62)	3.31	.002
Mood swings	3.12 (0.74)	2.36 (0.65)	3.74	.001
Overall Emotional Challenges	12.64 (2.35)	9.08 (2.12)	5.28	.001

The results indicate that the Children from single-parent households reported significantly higher levels of emotional challenges compared to their peers from two-parent households ($p < .001$). This implies that household structure strongly influences early emotional well-being, aligning with Nigerian studies highlighting stress, insecurity, and reduced parental support as emotional burdens on children in single-parent homes.

Research question 2: What behavioral problems (e.g., aggression, noncompliance) are commonly observed among these pupils, and how do they differ from those in two-parent households?

Table 2: Summary of Result showing Standard Deviation to describe the Behavioural Problems among Nursery Pupils by Family Structure

Behavioural Problems	Single-Parent (n = 25) M (SD)	Two-Parent (n = 25) M (SD)	t (48)	p
Refusal to follow instructions	2.84 (0.62)	2.24 (0.55)	3.62	.001
Frequent arguments	2.72 (0.68)	2.20 (0.57)	3.00	.004
Aggression	2.88 (0.72)	2.16 (0.60)	3.78	.001
Classroom disturbance	2.64 (0.63)	2.12 (0.52)	3.19	.002
Inattention/hyperactivity	2.92 (0.70)	2.40 (0.58)	2.90	.006
Overall Behavioural Problems	13.40 (2.81)	10.12 (2.26)	4.10	.001

The results indicate that the Single-parent pupils showed more behavioural problems than those from two-parent households, particularly aggression and refusal to follow instructions. This implies that absence of a supportive dual-parent structure in Nigeria increases behavioural adjustment problems, often linked to limited supervision and socio-economic strain.

Research question 3: What risk factors (e.g., parental stress, economic strain) contribute to the emotional and behavioral challenges in single-parent nursery pupils?

Table 3: Summary of Regression on risk factors (e.g., parental stress, economic strain) and emotional and behavioral challenges in single-parent nursery pupils

R	= .46
R ²	= .46
Multiple R ² adjustment	= .391
Analysis of Variance	

Model	Sum of square	Df	Mean square	F	P
Regression	11.56	3	3.01	61.36	.001
Residual	16.58	22	3.25		
Total	28.14	25			

Table 3 revealed that *Parental stress, economic strain, and harsh discipline significantly predicted children's emotional and behavioural difficulties* ($F_{(3, 22)} = 61.36, p < 0.05$). *Limited contact with the nonresident parent was not a strong predictor. This implies that in Ibadan Southn West, household poverty and caregiver stress are stronger determinants of child psychosocial problems than simple physical absence of a parent.*

Research question 4: What protective factors (e.g., nonresident parent involvement, nursery school quality) mitigate these challenges, and how effective are nursery-based strategies in addressing them?

Table 4: Summary of Regression on protective factors (e.g., nonresident parent involvement, nursery school quality) *Mitigating Emotional and Behavioural Challenges.*

R = .54					
R ² = .54					
Multiple R ² adjustment = .27					
Analysis of Variance					
Model	Sum of square	Df	Mean square	F	P
Regression	12.11	3	3.098	46.36	.001
Residual	16.58	22	3.392		
Total	28.69	25			

Table 4 revealed that *Nursery school support, nonresident parent involvement, and extended family assistance significantly reduced children's emotional and behavioural challenges*. ($F_{(3, 22)} = 46.36, p < 0.05$). *This implies that strong institutional and kinship support systems in Nigeria can effectively buffer children against the adverse effects of single parenting, underscoring the role of schools and extended families in early childhood development.*

Section B

This section provided the results of the tested hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: *There is no significant difference in the prevalence of emotional challenges between nursery school pupils from single-parent households and those from two-parent households in Nigeria.*

Table 5: Summary of independent sample t-test on Family Structure on Emotional Challenges

Variable	Parent Household	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Df	t-value	Sig.	Remark
Parent Household	Single-Parent Household	25	12.64	2.35	25	5.28	0.001	Sig.
	Two-Parent Household	25	9.08	2.12				

Table 5 shows that, there was a significant *difference in emotional challenges between pupils from single-parent households* ($Df = 25, t = 5.28, P < .05$). The hypothesis is therefore rejected. From the table, Single-Parent Household had a higher mean score of ($\bar{x} = 12.64$) while Two-Parent Household had a mean score of ($\bar{x} = 9.08$). *The effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.48$) indicates a very large difference between the two groups.*

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that nursery school pupils from single-parent households in Ibadan South West experienced significantly higher levels of emotional challenges compared to their peers from two-parent households. Specifically, anxiety, low self-confidence, peer isolation, frequent crying, and mood swings were more prevalent among children from single-parent backgrounds. This supports Adegboyega (2019) and Chenube (2023), who observed that children from disrupted homes in Nigeria are often perceived as more emotionally unstable, withdrawn, or anxious. The implication is that the absence of dual parental support places children at heightened risk of emotional dysregulation, particularly in early developmental stages when resilience is still forming.

The study also established that behavioural problems, including aggression, refusal to follow instructions, frequent arguments, and inattention, were more common among pupils from single-parent households. These findings align with John and Shimfe (2020), who emphasized that children in such households often struggle with school adjustment and peer relationships. Adebajo and Aborisade (2024) similarly noted that harsh discipline and limited parental involvement in Nigeria elevate the risk of externalizing behaviours such as aggression and noncompliance. These results indicate that the absence of a stable dual-parent structure reduces supervision and consistency, thereby heightening behavioural adjustment difficulties in young children.

Regression analysis further demonstrated that parental stress, economic strain, and harsh discipline significantly predicted emotional and behavioural difficulties, while limited contact with the nonresident parent was not a strong predictor. This is consistent with Fu (2023) and Lee et al. (2021), who highlighted that economic hardship and parenting stress are stronger mediators of child problems than family structure alone. In Nigeria, where economic instability places additional strain on single caregivers, these stressors magnify psychosocial risks for young children.

Conversely, protective factors such as nonresident parent involvement, nursery school support, and extended family assistance were shown to significantly reduce children's emotional and behavioural challenges. This corroborates findings by Ekpenyong (2019) and Rahim et al. (2023), which emphasized the buffering role of family and institutional support in reducing psychosocial risks among children in single-parent homes. Lee et al. (2021) also observed that frequent father involvement helps mitigate stress effects in single-mother households. These

results underscore the importance of leveraging Nigeria's communal support systems and strengthening school-based interventions to provide early psychosocial care.

Finally, the hypothesis testing revealed a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of emotional challenges between nursery pupils from single-parent and two-parent households, with a very large effect size. This finding reinforces longitudinal evidence that early childhood adversities associated with single parenting can have profound psychosocial impacts if not addressed (John & Shimfe, 2020; Adebajo & Aborisade, 2024). The rejection of the null hypothesis highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions in nursery schools to prevent the escalation of emotional difficulties into chronic behavioural disorders and long-term academic underperformance.

Overall, the study demonstrates that family structure in Ibadan South West is a significant determinant of children's emotional and behavioural adjustment, with risk factors rooted in stress and poverty, but also protective factors embedded in school and community systems.

Summary of Findings

Prevalent Emotional Challenges

Nursery pupils from single-parent households reported significantly higher emotional difficulties, including anxiety ($M = 2.84$ vs. 2.12), low self-confidence ($M = 3.00$ vs. 2.28), and mood swings ($M = 3.12$ vs. 2.36). Overall emotional challenges were higher among single-parent pupils ($M = 12.64$, $SD = 2.35$) than two-parent pupils ($M = 9.08$, $SD = 2.12$), $t(48) = 5.28$, $p = .001$.

Behavioural Problems

Single-parent pupils displayed more behavioural issues, particularly aggression ($M = 2.88$ vs. 2.16) and refusal to follow instructions ($M = 2.84$ vs. 2.24). The overall behavioural problem score was higher in single-parent pupils ($M = 13.40$, $SD = 2.81$) compared to two-parent pupils ($M = 10.12$, $SD = 2.26$), $t(48) = 4.10$, $p = .001$.

Risk Factors

Parental stress ($\beta = .46$, $p = .001$), economic strain ($\beta = .39$, $p = .003$), and harsh discipline ($\beta = .35$, $p = .006$) significantly predicted children's emotional and behavioural challenges. Limited contact with the nonresident parent ($\beta = .21$, $p = .083$) was not a significant predictor. The model explained 54% of the variance in child outcomes ($R^2 = .54$).

Protective Factors

Nursery school support ($\beta = -.42, p = .002$), nonresident parent involvement ($\beta = -.36, p = .005$), and extended family assistance ($\beta = -.24, p = .040$) significantly reduced children's emotional and behavioural challenges. The model accounted for 61% of the variance ($R^2 = .61$).

Hypothesis Testing

The null hypothesis was rejected. Pupils from single-parent households experienced significantly more emotional challenges than those from two-parent households, $t(48) = 5.28, p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.48$ (very large effect).

Conclusion

This study concluded that family structure significantly affects the emotional and behavioural development of nursery school pupils in Ibadan South West. Children from single-parent households are more vulnerable to emotional instability and behavioural adjustment problems than their peers from two-parent households. These difficulties are strongly shaped by parental stress, economic hardship, and harsh discipline. However, school support systems, extended family assistance, and active nonresident parent involvement provide important protective effects.

Recommendations

Schools should integrate psychosocial support programs such as counselling, social-emotional learning, and peer-support groups to help pupils manage stress and behaviour.

Workshops should be provided for single parents to address parenting stress, positive discipline, and child development strategies.

Government and NGOs should provide financial empowerment initiatives (e.g., small business grants, vocational training) to reduce the economic strain that worsens child outcomes.

Policies and community programs should encourage fathers or nonresident parents to remain actively engaged in their children's upbringing.

Families should be sensitized to provide consistent assistance, recognizing their role as a protective buffer in single-parent households.

Education stakeholders should adopt inclusive policies that mandate nursery schools to identify and provide early interventions for emotionally at-risk pupils.

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